

Paul Haupt

BIBLICAL LOVE-DITTIES

A Critical Interpretation,
and Translation, of the
Song of Solomon

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A Critical Interpretation, and Translation, of the Song of Solomon

By

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Baltimore*

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BIBLICAL LOVE-DITTIES.

GOETHE says in the notes to his *Westöstlicher Divan*¹ that the Song of Solomon is 'the most tender and inimitable expression of graceful yet passionate love that has come down to us.'² Unfortunately the poems cannot be fully enjoyed—since they are fragmentary, telescoped, or driven into one another, and mixed up; but it is delightful to divine the conditions under which the poets lived. The mild air of the most charming district of Canaan breathes through the poem, cosy rustic conditions, vineyards, gardens, beds of spices, some urban limitations,³ and a royal court in the background.⁴ But the principal theme is an ardent longing of youthful hearts, seeking, finding, repulsing,⁵ attracting, under various most simple conditions. We thought repeatedly of selecting and arranging something out of this charming confusion, but this enigmatic and inextricable condition invests those few leaves with a peculiar charm. Many a time well-meaning methodical minds have been tempted to find or establish an intelligible connection, but a subsequent student must do the work all over again.'

This view is, perhaps, too pessimistic. It is true that it is impossible to retrace the original plan of the author of the Song of Solomon, for the simple reason that there is no author of the Book. But the traditional arrangement, or rather disarrangement, may be

¹ *Goethes Werke herausgegeben im Auftrage der Grossherzogin Sophie von Sachsen*, vol. vii. (Weimar, 1888) p. 8. Cf. P. Holzhausen, *Goethe und seine Uebersetzung des Hohenliedes in Deutsche Revue*, March, 1896, pp. 370-372.

² This will perhaps strike some as an exaggeration.

³ This is not correct; *watchmen* in iii. 3 and v. 7 represents a subsequent addition.

⁴ There are only allusions to the hangings in Solomon's palace (i. 5) and to Solomon's harem (vi. 8, viii. 11). In the other passages in which Solomon is mentioned, this name represents a scribal expansion, while *King* (i. 4 and 12, iii. 9 and 11) refers to the King of the Wedding-feast, i. e., the bridegroom. Jews in Russia and Palestine still call the bridegroom King.

⁵ In v. 6 the lover does not reject the maiden; only i. 8 might, perhaps, be said to imply a rejection.

very much improved, and the received text freed from a great many subsequent additions and superfluous repetitions. In this rearrangement the Song of Solomon certainly becomes much more intelligible than it is in its traditional 'charming confusion.' The restoration of the individual songs is far more important than the restoration of the sequence of the love-ditties in the original collection. The arrangement of the songs may have varied at an early date; it may even have been injudicious and inappropriate from the beginning.

The so-called Song of Solomon is not the work of one poet but a late post-Exilic collection of popular nuptial songs and love-ditties which may all have been sung at Hebrew weddings, although they were not originally composed for this purpose. They were probably compiled in the neighborhood of Damascus after the beginning of the Seleucidan era (312 B.C.). In Palestine the autumn is the usual time for weddings; after the harvest, says Dalman in the introduction to his *Palestinian Divan*,¹ the young men have leisure and also money to pay for the brides, but in the country east of the Jordan, especially in the neighborhood of Damascus, the majority of the weddings take place during March which is the most beautiful month of the year. According to Wetzstein,² for many years Prussian Consul at Damascus, the weddings are celebrated there on the threshing-floor of the village, which is at that time of the year a flowery meadow. This Springtide of Love is described in the beautiful poem which we find in the second chapter of the Song of Solomon:

- ii. 8 Hark! dearest mine,
 behold, he is coming,
 Over mountains leaping,
 over hillocks skipping.
- 9 Behold, he is standing
 behind our wall there!
 From windows I peer down,
 through lattices peeping.
- 10 Arise, my darling!
 ah, come my fair one!
- 11 For look you, past is the winter,
 and rains no longer are falling,
- 12 The ground is covered with flowers,
 and birds fill the air with warbling.

¹ Gustav H. Dalman, *Palästinischer Diwan* (Leipzig, 1901) p. xii.

² Cf. S. R. Driver's *Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*, sixth edition New York, 1897) p. 452.

- We hear the cooing of turtles,
to our home is come back the swallow.¹
- 13 The fruit of figtrees is ripening,
and fragrance exhales from the grapevines.
Arise, my darling!
ah, come, my fair one!
- 14 My dove in the rock-cleft,
in the cliff's recesses,
Open, my sister!
come, my perfection!²
Thy face show me,
thy voice grant me!
For sweet thy voice,
and fair thy face.
Arise, my darling!
ah, come, my fair one!³

The bride was given away by her brothers, and in the last chapter of the Song of Songs we have a little epigrammatic poem twitting the brothers of the bride for their unnecessary and premature solicitude concerning the chastity and the marriage of their sister.

The bride says:

- vi. 3 My dear one's am I, and he is mine, too;
vii. 10 and, ah, for my love he is longing.
ii. 1 A meadow-saffron of Sharon,
or a lily of the valleys am I.

There are no white lilies in Palestine; the word *susan* denotes, not a white lily but a dark purple sword-lily.⁴ The bride means to say that, while she may be a little tanned like the pale-lilac flowers of the meadow-saffron, or even like the dark purple sword-lilies, she is just as beautiful as these flowers, and our Saviour said (Matt. vi. 29) that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. The bride therefore continues that, while she may be a little swarthy like the black tents of the Bedouins, she is nevertheless just as beautiful as the magnificent hangings in Solomon's palace. The Bedouin girls consider themselves black and call the city girls white. The white and the brown girls play a

¹ Cf. Jeremiah viii. 7.

² Cf. chapter v, verse 2.

³ The rhythm of the translations has been much improved by the kind assistance of the distinguished coeditor of the *Polychrome Bible*, Horace Howard Furness.

⁴ *Gladiolus atrovioaceus*. The Greeks called this dark purple sword-lily *hyacinth*. Apollo caused this flower to spring from the blood of Hyacinthus. Ovid (*Metamorph.* x. 210) says that the hyacinth looks like a lily, but is not white but purple; and Theocritus (x. 28) says to the graceful but sunburnt Syrian maiden Bombyce. The violets and hyacinths are swart, yet these flowers are chosen the first in garlands. The ancients believed that the exclamation Al 'woe,' was marked on the petals of the hyacinth.

very prominent part in modern Palestinian poetry. The second stanza of this love-ditty continues :

i. 5 Swarthy am I, but comely,
ye maidens who live in Jerusalem,
Dark like the tents of Kedar,
but like arras in Solomon's palace.

6 Heed not my swarthy complexion,
the sun it is that has burned me :
Wroth were the sons of my mother,
of the vineyards they made me the keeper.

Here a glossator has appended an additional clause,

but I have not kept my own vineyard,

and the meaning of 'vineyards,' *i. e.*, virginity, was explained in an illustrative quotation from a song which the maidens, it may be supposed, used to sing in the vineyards, and which may be compared to the *Schnadahüpfeln* in the Bavarian, Tyrolese, and Styrian Alps :

ii. 15 Catch us the foxes,
the little foxes,¹
Destroying vineyards,²
our vineyards in blossom.

The bride then continues that her brothers used to say when she was still an immature little girl :

viii. 8 We have a tiny little sister,
and breasts, not as yet, has she.
But what shall we do with our sister,
when the time comes for her wooing ?

9 If she be like a wall (stopping lovers),
we will place on it copings of silver.

We will crown her with a silver bridal crown and give her a handsome outfit, if she marries with our consent, but

If a door (open wide to all lovers),
we will bar it with boards made of cedars.

10 Albeit a wall am I thus far,
my breasts are now growing like towers,
And to them I am verily seeming
ready to surrender the fortress.

Then the maiden addresses her lover :

viii. 1 Ah, that thou wert my brother,
nursed at the breast of my mother !

¹ That is, the young men.

² Foxes are very fond of grapes; cf. the Esopian fable of the Fox and the Sour Grapes.

Then, wheresoever I meet thee,
I might kiss, and none would contemn me!

To my mother's house I would lead thee,
to the chamber of her who there bore me,
And make thee drink wine that is spiced
and the must of the pomegranate fruitage.

i. e., I will bestow my love on thee.¹

The lover is just as enthusiastic in the praise of his sweetheart. He says, there is a large vineyard at Baal-hammon,² alluding to a large harem, such as Solomon had according to 1 Kings xi. 3, where it is stated that he had 700 queens and 300 concubines. That vineyard was so large that the owner could not keep it in order without assistance, just as a large harem requires a number of eunuchs. The keepers of this large vineyard probably consume one-fifth of the annual income, and it is not impossible that the inmates of a large harem may bestow one-fifth of their favors on the keepers. The lover prefers to have his bride exclusively for himself and to allow no percentage whatever to an 'assistant.' He says:

viii. 11 A vineyard there is at Baal-hammon,—
a vineyard entrusted to keepers;
Any man could have had for its fruitage
a thousand shekels of silver.

¹² In my sole charge is my vineyard,
nought else on earth do I care for :³
I'll resign to thee, Solomon, the thousand,
and two hundred therefrom to the keepers!

In a subsequent love-ditty the lover describes the superiority of his sweetheart over all queens and concubines as follows :

vi. 8 Solomon's queens numbered sixty,
his concubines eighty in number ;
9 But one is my dove, and one only,
and one alone my perfection.

From her birth she was pure and was spotless,
unsullied she was from an infant ;
The maidens who see her admire her,
both queens and concubines praise her.

¹ This explanatory gloss appears in the received text at the end of the twelfth verse of the preceding chapter.

² Baal-hamon of the received text is an intentional alteration for Baal-khammon, the name of a Phœnician solar deity. The vineyard was probably on a hill that was especially fruitful and sunny (see Isaiah v. 1 in the *Polychrome Bible*, p. 5) and therefore sacred to Baal-khammon (*cf.* the notes on Leviticus (in the *Polychrome Bible*, p. 102, l. 3).

³ *Cf.* Psalm lxxiii. 25.

He assures her that with him she will be safe anywhere, on the brinks of precipices, on the tops of the highest mountains, in the haunts of lions and leopards. He will guard her and protect her. He says:

From Lebanon¹ with me thou mayst journey,
 from Lebanon with me, my bride,
 Look down from the height of Amana,²
 from the heights of Shenir³ and Hermon,⁴

From the resting places of lions,
 from mountains haunted by leopards.

We find also a little raillery at the expense of the newly-married couple, relating the teasing answer which the bridegroom is said to have given to his sweetheart when she asked for a tryst. The maiden said :

i. 7 Oh, tell me, thou, my beloved,
 where at high noon thou wilt tarry?
 Why, dearest, astray should I wander
 amid the flocks of thy comrades?

This phrase is equivocal. The original meaning is wandering about in quest of the tryst, but it suggests also the idea of wandering from the path of duty. The Orientals are very fond of ambiguities, especially the Jews of Damascus; a common saying at Damascus was *alhanu min Yehûdî*, 'more fond of veiled allusions than a Jew.' In the same way the phrase, 'Feed thy kids,' in the answer of the lover has a special meaning. A kid was the customary present given to a female friend (Arab. *ṣadiqe*) who was visited by a man from time to time. When Judah saw his daughter-in-law, Tamar, who had covered her face and wrapped herself, he said to her, I will send thee a kid;⁵ and when Samson visited his Philistine 'friend' at Timnath he brought her a kid.⁶ Such a gift was probably expected at every visit of the husband. The 'bride' remained at her father's house, and the 'husband' visited her there. According to Ammianus Marcellinus⁷ (xiv. 4) marriage among the Saracens was a temporary contract for which the wife received a price. In Persia these temporary alliances are still recognised

¹ This includes the Antilibanus, east of the Lebanon range.

² That is the *Yâbal az-Zabadâny*, northwest of Damascus, below which is the source of the river Amana or Abana (2 Kings v. 12), i. e. the *Nahr Baradî* which flows through Damascus.

³ The northern part of Antilibanus between Baalbec and Homs (*Emesa*).

⁴ The highest peak of the Antilibanus, southwest of Damascus.

⁵ Genesis xxxviii. 17; cf. Proverbs vii. 10.

⁶ Judges xv. 1; cf. xvi. 1 and the notes on Judges, in the *Polychrome Bible*, p. 83, l. 40.

⁷ Born at Antioch, Syria, about 330 A. D.

as legal.¹ In the Book of Tobit (ii. 12) we read that after Tobit had been stricken with blindness, his wife, Anna, went to a factory where women were employed as weavers, and when the owners gave her one day a kid in addition to her wages, she fell out with her husband who would not believe her story and insisted on the kid being returned to the owners of the factory, as he felt ashamed of his wife. We know also that a young he-goat was the offering of the Greek *hetæra* to the Goddess of Love, Aphrodite.

The lover's reply to his sweetheart—

- i. 8 If, indeed, thou know not the pathway,
of the flocks, do thou follow the footprints;
There, then, thy kids thou mayst pasture
near to the tents of the shepherds!

means therefore, If you do not love me sufficiently to be instinctively guided to the place where I shall rest at noon, you may bestow your favors on the other shepherds and receive, as the price of consent, a number of kids which you may pasture near to the tents of the shepherds. She will have so many kids that she will be able to start a flock of her own. Similarly a poor actor might be told that he would receive so many apples and eggs that he would be able to open a grocery store after the performance.

The most beautiful poem of these Biblical love-ditties is contained in verses 6 and 7 of the last chapter, which must be preceded by the beginning of the third chapter:

- iii. 1 At night, as I lay on my pillow,
for him whom I love was I longing.
2 ²I will rise and fare forth through the city
both through streets that are wide and are narrow.
3 I met men who fared forth through the city:
Have ye seen my beloved? I asked them.
4 But scarce had I gone a step further
when before me, lo! stood my loved one!

I clasped him and would not release him,
and then, lo, I said to my loved one;

- viii. 6 Hang me close to thy heart like a signet,³
on thy hand, like a ring, do thou wear me!

¹ See W. Robertson Smith, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (Cambridge, 1885), pp 65, 67, 76.

² Supply, I said to myself.

³ Seals were worn either as pendants from a cord around the neck (in Gen. xxxviii. 18 Judah gives Tamar his seal, his signet-cord, and his staff, as a pledge) or as seal-rings on the right hand (cf. Jerem. xxii. 24; Haggai ii. 23). The maiden desires to be just as close to her lover's heart as his seal hanging down from his seal-cord, and just as dear to him as his seal-pendant or his seal-ring on his right hand. 'Keep me as thy seal' has nearly the same meaning as the phrase 'Keep me as the apple of thine eye' (Psalm xvii. 8, Prov. vii. 2, Deut. xxxii. 10).

For Love as Death is strong,
 and Passion as Sheol unyielding.
 Its flames are flames of fire,
 its flashes are flashes of lightning.

- 7 Nothing is able to quench it,
 Neither can any streams drown it.
 If one should resign for it all his possessions,
 Could any man therefore condemn him ?

If the Song of Solomon is nothing but a collection of profane love-ditties in praise of sensual love (just as Psalm xlv. is a nuptial song presented by the Jewish high-priest, the Maccabee Jonathan, at the wedding of the Syrian King Alexander Balas and the Egyptian princess Cleopatra, the daughter of King Ptolemy VI. Philometor, which was celebrated at Ptolemais in 150 B.C. as related in 1 Macc. x. 59), some might raise the question whether the Song of Songs is not out of place in the Bible. It is nowhere cited in the New Testament. The great Hebraist, J. D. Michaelis, of the University of Göttingen, omitted the Song of Songs from his critical translation of the Bible.¹ In the same way the canonicity of the Book of Ecclesiastes was still contested in the second century of our era. We must remember that the canon of Scripture is a human institution concerning which opinions differ. The Roman Catholic Church includes several books in the Canon which are generally looked upon as apocryphal, although some of them are undoubtedly superior from a religious and ethical point of view to certain of the canonical books; *cf. e. g.*, the apocryphal Books of the Maccabees and the canonical Book of Esther, or the apocryphal Book of Ecclesiasticus and the canonical Book of Ecclesiastes. The Book of Ecclesiastes was practically condemned by our Saviour. The principal maxim of Ecclesiastes, which is repeated five times in the Book (ii. 24, iii. 12, 22, v. 17, viii. 15), is: *Eat, drink, and be merry*, but in Luke xii. 15-31 (a passage which contains several allusions to Ecclesiastes, including the reference to the lilies of the field and Solomon in all his glory) we read the beautiful parable of our Lord in which He says: The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully; and he thought, I will pull down my barns and build greater. I will say to my soul, Soul thou hast much goods laid up for many years, take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said to him, Thou fool, this night thy soul will be required of thee. Seek ye first the kingdom of

¹ *Cf.* Johann David Michaelis *Deutsche Uebersetzung des Alten Testaments, mit Anmerkungen für Ungelehrte*, part xii (Göttingen, 1785), p. xxiv.

God and His righteousness! Be not anxious for the morrow. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.¹ There can be no stronger condemnation of the teachings of Ecclesiastes than these words of our Saviour, and this ought to settle the question, at least for the Christian Church, whether Ecclesiastes has any claims to canonical authority.²

The late Professor Franz Delitzsch, of Leipzig, one of the foremost Biblical scholars of the nineteenth century and one of the most devout Christians I ever met in my life, stated in the introduction to his commentary on the Song of Solomon, that this Book was the most difficult book in the Old Testament, but the meaning becomes perfectly plain, in fact too plain, as soon as we know that it is not an allegorical dramatic poem but a collection of popular love-ditties which must be interpreted on the basis of the erotic imagery in the Talmud and modern Palestinian and other Moham-medan poetry.

¹ Compare Matthew vi. 33.

² Cf. my paper on the Book of Ecclesiastes in *Oriental Studies*, a selection of the papers read before the Oriental Club of Philadelphia, 1888-1894 (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1894), p. 245.

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